

## Swan Ball — The Founding of a Legend

The hard work behind the glamour

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In my childhood bedroom, large pink gauze butterflies flitted about the windows. They were decorations from the inaugural Swan Ball, and a constant reminder of what my mother wrought from her imagination and plain hard work.

Here's how it started:

On a Sunday afternoon in the early fall of 1962, my mother, Jane Dudley, was sitting on a bench at the Belle Meade Country Club, watching my father play tennis. Garth Fort came over and sat beside her. Cheekwood, had opened to the public as a museum the previous year, and Fort was the first chairman of the board.

Naturally, the conversation turned to Cheekwood, and Fort mentioned that the museum was in dire need of income. Did my mother have any ideas for a fundraiser? She replied that a certain ball in New York raised a substantial amount of money—and that she thought it could be done better. Those were fateful words.

A week later Fort and Walter Sharp called on my mother, and asked her to chair such a ball for Cheekwood. As she recalls, "I said of course I had to discuss it with Guilford. He had no idea what it involved; I'm not sure I did."

The first step was to choose a location and a date. Early summer was the obvious choice, because the gardens of are at their prettiest. And the Swan Lawn provided an ideal location. It is large enough to hold a sizable tent, and close to the mansion and the kitchen facilities—a convenience, as it turned out, which the Ball did not even avail itself of the first year.

She formed an advisory committee, comprised of Hortense Ingram, Martha Lawrence, Leah Rose Werthan, Alice Earthman and Jeanne Zerfoss. They were prominent volunteers and together represented a broad swath of Nashville society. My mother swears that when she invited them to help, she said, "I want you to be on my advisory committee; that means if I want your advice, I'll ask for it. And let me warn you, I may not take it." She only remembers one committee meeting: the day they set the price.

In 1962, sitting on our living room sofa, the committee made the outrageous decision to charge \$50 a ticket. At the time, the Hunt Ball was the city's premier social event and tickets for it were \$17.50.

People laughed at the \$50 price tag. Indeed, my mother remembers, "At Garden Club meetings people would scream at me, 'Who do you think is coming to your \$50 party?'" But they came. As my mother notes, "When we started, the Dow was around 640. Do the math and you'll see that we are not charging nearly enough today." But I digress.

She booked the tent; hired the Lester Lanin Orchestra from New York; secured the caterer, Mr. Maxwell. She consulted on décor with Harold Freeman, the best florist in town. And she designed the wrought-iron candelabras that remained the Swan Ball tables' centerpieces for decades.

Then winter arrived and my parents went to Palm Beach, as was their habit. There, my mother seized the opportunity to add the critical dollop of glamour for which the Swan Ball is famous. She saw Earl Blackwell, who promised to cover the Ball in *Town & Country*. She saw Hollywood dress designer Jean Louis, who agreed to bring his collection—and his muse, Kathryn Crosby. And she saw scores of friends, members of the international jet set, who supported her efforts and were glad to come to Nashville for the big event.

The night of the Ball was a huge success. When my mother stood to thank the crowd for coming, they stood in turn, and gave her a five-minute ovation.

However, as the founders of *People Magazine* know, failure is more interesting than success. And so, by the Monday after the Ball, those who had predicted doom were back at their task.

After lunch, my father telephoned home to say that everyone he had passed on Union Street had stopped him to commiserate. Word was out that the Ball had lost money and that he would need to make up the difference himself.

Once again, my mother got to work, telephoning every vendor to find out what the final bill would be. By 7:30 that night, she was sure they had a solid profit of at least \$36,000. She then turned to her friend, *Tennessean* editor and publisher John Seigenthaler. Calling him at home, she explained what had happened that day, and asked him to print that the Swan Ball would make at least \$30,000. He put it on the front page the next morning. And she started planning the following year's Ball.

I have another childhood memory. In it, my mother—hair in a chignon, glittering gown, elbow-length white gloves—is the epitome of glamour. It's Swan Ball season. Her rose garden is in full bloom, and between meetings and phone calls and seating her tables, she has been gardening, ensuring that her roses, too, are at their lovely peak. Under those elegant gloves her arms are covered with long scratches. After all, beauty and glamour take hard work. And my mother is just the girl to deliver it.

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